



The Fools and the Clowns of Tudor Society and Its Impact on Shakespearean Plays

Dr. Jamal Uddin Ahmed

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Chhamaria Anchalik College

Assam (India)

Introduction:

The Tudor period in England began in 1485 and ended in 1603. During this long period, five monarchs reigned over the country. Henry VII introduced the Tudor period in 1485 after he had won the Battle of Bosworth Field. He was succeeded on the English throne by his son, Henry VIII. Then Edward VI and Queen Mary I ascended to the throne, respectively. At the end of the Tudor series, Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne.

Queen Elizabeth ascended to the English throne in 1558 on November 17, upon the death of her half-sister Mary I. The era of her reign in England was marked by cultural and political enrichment. People were inspired by the Renaissance upliftment all over England. Entertainment was channelled through physical performance done by artists in the form of music, songs, and theatre. Besides these formal presentations on stage or in open places, the clowns or the fools were the players who customised their tricks in front of the aristocratic people, of whom the royal or noble classes were at the apex position. The fools in the English court served continuously for the employees in the court, as they were interested in the humours of the character of the fool. Popular fools served the Elizabethan court in subsequent years. Tarelton was an actor of the Elizabethan court who earned fame and a name in his professional services. In the course of the fools' activities in the Elizabethan court, several of Elizabeth's fools came and went so quickly.¹

The fools who came into the English court of the Elizabethan period went out immediately from their posts and left little impression of their presence behind them in the court. In opposition to their so-early arrival and departure from the court, some others who practised tricks for a longer time in the court left their impacts among the audiences who liked their joyful joking. The fools who remained longer in the English court were fully documented. They represent a wide variety of types, a cross-section of the possibilities of professional folly in the period that could hardly fail to have left its mark on contemporary drama². In this connection, Lockwood was a fool of the court who served in the office of Henry VIII, then Edward VI, and then Mary Well. At last, she served in the court of Queen Elizabeth. He was officially entitled as a jester. Thomas Staney, the royal juggler at Shrewsbury in 1553/4, entered the court of Elizabeth to serve the queen. Not only the king or queen kept the fool, but also the earl of the land appointed the fool to enjoy entertainment at the earnest time. Falstaff, though a fictional character by William Shakespeare in three plays, is indeed the impression of a jester who served in the reigning period of King Henry IV. The fools were not only mere entertainers but also individuals holding subversive positions within society. They acted as mirrors to human folly and simultaneously purveyors of uncomfortable truths.

The history of the Elizabethan period is specific in character with its focus on the patronage of the apex authorities towards the fools who played jokes to entertain the people at the English Court. The traditional trend of being engaged fools in court as well as in individual households was begun during the period of Edmund Ironside who reigned England during the first part of 11th century. At that time, Hitard was a famous

¹ Southworth, John. *Fools and Jesters at the English Court*, p. 167.

² *Ibid.*

jester in England. He belonged to Edmund Ironside, who, out of gratitude, bestowed on him the town of Walworth in the year 1016.³ The keeping jesters or fools at the court were formally continued for the merry making enjoyment among the courtiers of the country. From that period to the era of Queen Elizabeth in England, jesters were engaged periodically at the court for making merriment among the courtiers. One or more jesters served for the English Court from time to time in England.

From the time of Edmund Ironside to Queen Elizabeth, about six centuries passed, and the time was a longer period. During the time of these centuries, kings ascended and descended the English throne, but the court was never without jesters or fools. Famous jesters were kept at the court by every king in England. Sometimes the king himself was a pleasant joker, though he had a royal jester. King John was a very lugubrious joker himself, but he not only kept a merry jester, he also knew how to be exceedingly liberal to him. He provided privileges to the jester who served his majesty. He rewarded the estate to the fool. William Piculph, for example, was a jester under his authority whom he provided land at the cost of funning to the king.

The next series of kings, represented by Edward I, Edward II and Edward III on the English throne patronized not only the jesters but also harpers, and minstrels. The king expended shillings for these artists in practice. At the court of Edward's grandson and successor, Richard II, the ordinary joculars were doubtless to be found.⁴ Henry IV, the cousin brother of Richard II, was not less interested in the merriment created by the jesters than his predecessors. Similarly, Henry V and Henry VI, the successors of King Henry IV, were addicted to the mirth-telling as entertainment for mental refreshment. During their ruling of the country, there were royal as well as household fools for the kings. After the death of Henry VI, there appears court jester who is famous for efficient capacity to make half of England merry. Scogan was a famous jester of the time who served as jester for the king. It is said that Scogan was attached to the household of Edward IV.⁵ The king was so pleased with the gossip that Scogan narrated to him. When Henry VIII ascended the throne, the king put Will Sommers at the court as court jester. He was a fool to make the court entertain in the need of time.

During the ruling period of Queen Elizabeth in 16th century England, court jesters were dynamic in roles either in the court or in the somewhere of the country. They were also known as fools who were kept at both the royal court and at the noble's house. Their primary duty was to bring laughter and amusement to the court using wit in perspectives through jokes, songs, and antics. As jesters, they had their privilege of speech. They spoke freely. Even they could criticize the monarch or other courtiers. The jesters or fools were 'Natural' as well as 'Artificial'. The fools who were 'Natural' were individually having mental disabilities. The 'Artificial' fools, on the other hand, were intact mentally but trained to play the foolish role.

Richard Tarleton was a dynamic jester with quick wit and a good comedian in the Elizabethan period. He was a skilled fool in playing an artificial fool within the Queen's Players, who were a theatrical troupe that performed at court and toured in England. The jesters had been primarily employed to bring laughter and amusement to the court, often through jokes, songs, and antics.

Result of the Study:

During the Tudor period, Henry VII (reigned from 1485 to 1509 A.D.), Henry VIII (reigned from 1509 to 1547 A.D.), Edward VI (reigned from 1547 to 1553 A.D.), Mary I (reigned from 1553 to 1558 A.D.), and Elizabeth I (reigned from 1558 to 1603 A.D.) were the serial monarchs in England. The fools and the clowns were popular entertainers for the royal power as well as the rich households in England, and the tradition started many years past with the Tudor kingship in England. Various terms like 'minstrel', 'joculator', 'jongleur', 'buffoon', 'fool', 'jester', and 'court jester'. In the earlier years of England, Hitard, as mentioned above, belonged to king Edmund Ironside, and was known as a joculator. The tradition of being appointed fools in the English royal court began with Edmund and continued over the country kingship-wise.

During the Tudor period in England, Will Sommers, for instance, was a renowned court jester in the royal court of Henry VIII. Another fool was Jane Foole, who served as a court fool for a good many years in the English court of Queen Mary I. She also served as jester to Catherine Parr.

Next to the Queen Mary I, Elizabeth I ascended to the throne of England as queen. Her reigning period was glorious in many ways, one of which was the enrichment of merry-making hubs in the country with due consent to the availability of places for jesters in the court and the noble houses. One of the most famous jesters in the Elizabethan court was Richard Tarleton.

³ Doran. *The History of Court Fools*, p. 76.

⁴ Doran. *Op.cit.*, p. 88.

⁵ Doran. *Op.cit.*, p.92.

In the preferred background of Elizabethan fools and clowns in society, William Shakespeare comes to the stage of theatre and starts writing dramas in the form of tragedy and comedy. Both types of plays have characters of different categories, from higher to lower in social stratum. The kings, queens, princes and princesses, and laymen are represented as characters in his plays. In his famous tragedies, such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, William Shakespeare has portrayed the fool and the clown characters, and *Titus Andronicus* and the comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*, have the clown characters. This researcher has studied the plays of Shakespeare and finds the fool and clown characters. The fool and the clown characters are associated with some of these plays, of which the comedies deal more. Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Touchstone in *As You Like It*, Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost*, and Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* are the clown characters who add comic relief and deeper insight into the plays. Such fool characters often serve as a way to challenge societal norms and forward commentary on the human condition. Their roles in the plays are unique perspectives that provide not only entertainment but also invite the audience to think on the more critical themes woven throughout the dramatic works of William Shakespeare. In the tragic plays of Shakespeare, the fool is found as a character to play a role in the plot of the drama. There is the fool in *King Lear* who is portrayed unnamed. The gravediggers in *Hamlet* are characterised as providers of dark humour. The Yorick in the same play is a sign of the humour that he provided in life when he was alive.

Discussion of study:

The fools who existed in the practical life of Tudor society performed their roles offstage, and in a later age, onstage, particularly in the reigning period of Queen Elizabeth in England. They played in the royal office and in the house of the land. The householders who engaged the fool or the clown paid remuneration. They co-lived with the masters at home. They were licensed and natural fools both in the court and the house. The licensed fools in the country were more skilled than the natural ones. The skilled fools amused their audience using skill. The natural fools, on the other hand, used their naturalness so that the audience valued their perceived innocence and directness.

The history writers or book authors of the time during the Tudor period recorded the engagement of the fools and the clowns in their literary writings. The book entitled *Disability and the Tudors: All the King's Fools* by Philippa Vincent-Connolly is a book about the lives of fools and their treatment in Tudor society. Besides, there is a description of those fools who had disabilities and how they were perceived and treated in the Tudor court. Robert Armin compiles some stories in the context of several well-known fools in his entitled book *Foole upon Foole*. In this book, he highlights the importance of fools in court life and, at the same time, their interactions with the royal family. Here in this book is included the relationship between King Henry VIII and Will Sommers. This book is a focus on the lives of reputed fools and their insights into the humour, wit, and simultaneous social functions in the Tudor court. Samuel Rowley has composed a history play in the literary title of the book, *When You See Me, You Know Me*, which includes characters like Will Sommers. This book showcases what the fool's role in the courtly affairs is. This historical jester of Tudor England was a direct attraction of the dramatist, like Thomas Nashe, in the field of playwriting. In *Summer's Last Will and Testament*, Thomas Nashe portrays the character of Will Sommers. He adds historical facts of a courtly jester (Will Sommers) in literary creation.

The fools possessed their estimation in the court or in the household. Tarleton, as a court jester to Elizabeth, had personalities of quick presentation both on stage and in the house and was so present in mind that he could create doggerel verse on the spot and also on the topics suggested by the audience. Tarleton was "Gentleman of the Chamber" to the Queen⁶. Queen Elizabeth was flexible in consideration of who had a weakness towards this fool Tarleton, whom the Queen permitted to wear the fool's attire either at her dining room home or abroad. This court jester could serve the Queen and the public with more confidence. He could make the Queen and the courtiers a pleasure uttering witty jokes. When Queen Elizabeth was serious, ... out of good humour, he could *undumpish* her at his pleasure⁷. Not only the Queen but also suitors in other courts regarded him as their usher to prepare their advantageous access to the Queen. "He told the Queen" says Fuller, "more of her faults than most of her chaplains, and cured her melancholy better than all of her physicians."⁸ Not a single court jester was found in the Elizabethan court: its number was more than the single. Both male and female jesters were kept in the court of the country. Mrs Tamasin, for example, was a female, and Tomasin de Paris was a male court dwarf and jester of Queen Elizabeth I between 1577 and 1603.

⁶ Doran. *Op.cit.* p. 120.

⁷ Doran. *Op.cit.* p. 128.

⁸ *Ibid.*

The fool is a defined term in Elizabethan society that encompasses a spectrum of characters who are distinct in roles and characteristics. The fools are found to have different types and characters. One category of fool is defined as a natural fool who often possesses an innate simplicity or foolishness, leading to a unique perspective on life that can reveal deeper truths. Their unfiltered observations and innocent wisdom frequently highlight the absurdities of the world around them, making them both amusing and insightful figures in literature and theatre. However, it can be argued that the label of "natural fool" may oversimplify the complexities of individuals who display unconventional wisdom. Moreover, attributing their insights solely to mental deficiencies is a risk of undermining their agency and the potential for intellectual depth beyond societal perceptions of foolishness. The Elizabethan noble families kept such fools in their households for amusement. They were also the objects of pity for their physical deficiencies. Their utterances, though nonsensical, were perceived as either divinely inspired or innocently insightful. This highlights the complex role of natural fools in Elizabethan society, where their perceived limitations could lead to both derision and a unique form of wisdom.

Another type of fool is the artificial fool, also known as a jester, who was a professional entertainer. The royal and noble families of Elizabethan England engaged the artificial fool in their households to enjoy merriments. The Artificial Fools were witty enough to use a sharp tongue and high intelligence to make humour. Standing in a privileged position, the artificial fool spoke truths that the others in society did not encourage him to utter. The Artificial Fool characters have their license to mock anyone in the social milieu. In this way, they were the social commentators.

The third category of fool is entitled 'the clown' or alternatively called 'rustic fool'. This clownish character is predominantly found in entertainment platforms like theatres. The clown was of either higher or lower social standing. The lower social standing is typically a country bumpkin or simpleton. The clown created humour depending on physical comedy, malapropism, misunderstandings, and a more direct and less intellectual form of wit.

The fourth type of fool is the Domestic Fool. This class of fool is less formal than that of artificial fool. The Domestic Fool, who is either a member of the family or a servant from outside, provides comic treatment within a household. Such treatment of comic relief is done through his innate foolishness and deliberate eccentricity.

The fools and clowns in Elizabethan society were more than mere laughter. They commented on different issues that they observe either in society or persons of the family. Societal or personal incongruities were reviewed by their supervision. The artificial fools who are professional cadres in action of the Elizabethan society served as safety valves for tensions found in society. They also served as a critique of the then society. They satirised the power, raising questions and highlighting the hypocrisy. Undoubtedly they were primarily the entertainment makers, using wit, songs, dances, and antics for the public. They could provide emotional release of the hierarchical society by mocking reality. Besides, the fools served as mirrors to uphold the human conditions like the absurdities of pride, ambition, and self-deception. With this, they forced the audiences to confront their own imperfection.

During the Elizabethan period, the fools or clowns dressed themselves to attract people in reality. The court fools put on distinctive, colourful attire. Sometimes they put on motley clothing and were a visual representation of their role.

Shakespeare's fools and clowns in plays: A masterful integration.

The Elizabethan reality in the context of the fools and clowns at the royal home was a fact in reality. William Shakespeare, being attracted to their immensely incongruous personalities, prescribed these characters as dramatic potentialities in his plays, both tragedies and comedies. He portrayed these characters in his plays in such a way as to elevate them from simple comic relief to complex and multi-layered characters. They sometimes served as moral guides or intellectual pursuits in his dramas. Besides, the fools represented themselves as witty personalities. For example, the fool in *King Lear* is a fool of wit who speaks what King Lear is in reality. After losing his majesty, Lear is in the forest with his fool, who defines him (Lear) as nothing. The fool talks the humour to relieve the audience from the intensity of the tragic scene of *King Lear* and at the same time to criticise his flawed decision as a blunder that he (King Lear) did in his majesty.

The fools in Shakespearean plays sometimes speak in such a way that their speeches falsify their foolishness. They use wit, songs, and riddles in talks to unveil the pretensions and self-deceptions of others. Feste in *Twelfth Night*, for example, is a man of melancholic wisdom who is able to see what is going through Olivia's paltered mourning. Touchstone is a fool in *As You Like It* who exercises his wit and cynicism to comment on issues like the romantic ideals and social conventions practised in the court. The fools of Shakespeare are by and large peasants or commoners taken from societal standing. The fools use their wits to outmatch people of higher social rank. Such treatment of Shakespearean fools is similar to the real fools in Elizabethan society.

Findings of Study:

Overall, in studies on the topic assigned in the title of this article, certain findings come into appearance beforehand. These findings are as under

- i. The comic entertainment agents, like fools and clowns, were traditionally flushed in the currency of Tudor England.
- ii. The societal position of the fools or clowns is lower than the others in society and in the drama of William Shakespeare.
- iii. The perceived lack of social status of the fools or the clowns is an opportunity to speak freely on any kind of faults found in human society. Shakespearean fools like the fool of King Lear lack social status, and therefore they can speak freely to anybody.
- iv. The concept of fool and clown of Elizabethan society impacts the playwrights in writing with the portrayal of fool or clown characters in dramatic construction. William Shakespeare has picked up this concept of fool or clown from Elizabethan society, as he was a member of it and taking the said concept of such mirthful characters, he treated them in his plays with his own mastery.
- v. The Tudor fools are correspondent and correlated with high majesty in royal society. Similarly, the Shakespearean fool is in the company of higher authority.

Conclusion:

The integration of the fool and the clown with Tudor England is unavoidable to embody a unique blend of entertainment, social commentary, and also philosophical insight. Though they were engaged in court or in-house being amused, they focused on social matters in comic treatment. William Shakespeare was a member of English society in the last part of Tudor England, and therefore, as an unparalleled personality to understand the human condition, he could masterfully translate the Tudor figures (fools) into the stage, where he transformed them into some of the most illustrious and peculiar characters. Feste in *Twelfth Night* is a demonstration of true wisdom that often exists not in the robes of high majesty or in the proclamation of great scholars but is found in the motley dress and bells of those who venture to speak some uneasy truths that remind us of our inborn folly that lies within us all. Similarly, the Fool's loyalty to Lear in *King Lear* and the rustic charm of Nick Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have their affiliation with logic and self-assurance to interpret situations of their own. That is why Shakespearean fools or clowns are more than the fools. Indeed, they are the embodiment of something in society that elevates them from a mere fool. Their seeming words in dialogues bear witness to wisdom and practicality in the life of human society. They are the truth tellers of society.

Reference:

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